



LOUIS ALTHUSSER 2017-12-19

MARXISM AS A FINITE THEORY (1978)

DOCUMENTATION, LEXICON ALTHUSSER, CAPITAL, CAPITALISM, MARX, MARXISM, NON-PHILOSOPHY

INTRODUCTION BY ROSSANA ROSSANDA (1978)

In November 1977, at the Venice conference on *Power and Opposition in Post-Revolutionary Societies*, Louis Althusser asserted that there is no theory of the state in Marx. The following March, *Il Manifesto* proposed to Althusser to develop this assertion, which had remained suspended after Venice, taking particularly into account the discussion underway on the left in Italy, and in particular the debate that took place in *Mondoperaia*, up to the interview with Giuliano Amato and Pietro Ingrao, and the recent writings of Biagio De Giovanni in *Rinascita*.

For this purpose two blocks of questions were directed to Althusser. The first still concerned the question of the state in the revolutionary experiences taking place; the second more closely grasped the Italian discussion, and precisely the theoretical discussion of the political sphere. We asked the French philosopher what he thought of the thesis whereby necessarily "the party becomes the state," and on the relations that in this case are created between the state and party and which are subjected to social conflicts and their forms of struggle. We are concerned now and above all in the transition, to rethink both the dictatorship of the proletariat – and the "critique of politics" that it entails – and the question, historically unresolved, of the extinction of the state. Can a society that is committed, even after the change of the dominant class, to the principle of "imbalance" and uninterrupted revolution, as Mao asserted, live without "rules of the game," norms, a law that is formed and fractured in the moment of conflict – at the cost of succeeding in expressing neither the "center," the "right" nor the "left," that is to say, obscuring the real social dialectic? Don't the law, the state, appear therefore as the form of social compromise that intervene at every phase, including in that of the transition? But if this is so, how and when is the state abolished? What reason is there to think that in communism the "producers" do not need a general political mediation?

Althusser began to respond to this block of questions, and a debate developed on his responses, which are included in this volume in their entirety. (*Discutere lo stato*)

Rossana Rossanda: During your intervention in Venice, you declared that there was no theory of the state in Marx. I think so too, although there are fragments of an analysis of the modern state more developed than in Lenin, and a sort of counter-theory: what the socialist state must not be. This debate concerns the socialist states and political life in the phase of the transition to communism. Does this life pass through the party, which becomes the state, even by means of an internal dialectic? Or if contradictions continue to exist, do they need to be expressed politically? In other words, can a society that is contradictory (Mao) live without rules of the game?

Louis Althusser: The questions you've submitted me are stated in a form that contains a whole series of presuppositions about Marxist theory, about the state and civil society, and about the disappearance of the state, as well as about politics.

1. It's no accident that I had difficulty with the word "*complessivo*," with the notion of "the whole," which is not unrelated to the theme of "generality." Behind certain indications it seems to me you can discern the idea that Marxist theory is capable of encompassing the totality of a process which it in fact only calls *the tendency*: since communism is a tendency of capitalist society.

I believe that Marxist theory is "finite," limited: that it is limited to the analysis of the capitalist mode of production, and of its contradictory tendency, which opens up the possibility of the transition to the abolition of capitalism and its replacement by "something else" which already appears implicitly in capitalist society. I believe that *Marxist theory is entirely the opposite of a philosophy of history* which "encompasses" the whole future of humanity, and which would thus be capable of defining the "end": communism, in a positive manner. Marxist theory (if we leave aside the temptation of the philosophy of history to which Marx himself sometimes succumbed, and which dominated in a crushing fashion the Second International and the Stalinist period) is

inscribed within and limited to the current existing phase: that of capitalist exploitation. All that it can say about the future is the *fragmented* and *negative* extension of the *current* tendency, the tendency to communism, observable in a whole series of phenomena of capitalist society. It is entirely necessary to see that it is on the basis of the *current* society that the transition (dictatorship of the proletariat) and the ultimate extinction of the state are thought. These are only indications deduced from the *current* tendency, which like every tendency in Marx, is counteracted and may not be achieved, unless the political struggle makes it real. But this reality cannot be predicted in its positive form: it is only in the course of the struggle that the possible forms come to light, are discovered, and become real.

I believe it is absolutely necessary to get rid of the idea that we find already in certain expressions of Lenin, and also in Gramsci, that Marxist theory is a “total” theory capable of concretely substituting for a philosophy of history, and thus capable of thinking of problems which are not “on the agenda,” in a form which anticipates their conditions and their solution. Marxist theory is a finite theory, and it is on the basis of its conscious finitude that it is possible to pose all of our major problems.

To which we have to add the fact that, even with regard to capitalist society and the workers' movement, Marxist theory says almost nothing about the state, ideology, politics, or the organizations of class struggle. It is a “blind spot” which doubtless testifies to the theoretical limits Marx ran up against, as if he was *paralyzed* by the bourgeois representation of the state, politics, etc., to the point of repeating it in a solely negative form. Blind spot or forbidden zone, the result is the same. And it is important, since the tendency to communism finds itself blocked (or unconscious of itself) in everything which concerns these “regions” or these problems.

2. The second presupposition concerns “politics.” It seems to me that Gramsci obscured rather than clarified this blind spot in Marx, by taking up the old bourgeois distinction of political society and civil society, even if he gave another sense to the notion of civil society (*private* hegemonic organizations, therefore outside the “sphere of the state” identified with “political society”). I believe that there is a link between the notions of political society, the state, and the function of “generality” (opposed to “private”) in the problematic of the Italian discussions, and that this kind of notion leads back either to the ideology (and the practice) of the bourgeois conceptions of politics, or to the idealism of a “universality” of the state realizing “the universal” or the “generality” of a humanity finally liberated from exploitation, the division of labor, and oppression (leaders/led), which Marx dragged along behind him for a long time, at least in the works of his youth, and which he inherited from Feuerbach.

The fact that the class struggle (bourgeois and proletarian) has the state as its stake from now on, does not at all mean that politics must be defined with relation to the state. In the same way that Marx consciously presented *Capital* as a “critique of political economy,” we have to manage to think what he did not do: a “critique of politics” as it is imposed by the ideological conception and the practice of the bourgeoisie. It is from the point of view of the bourgeoisie that there is a distinction between “political society” and “civil society,” I mean that this distinction is constitutive of ideology and the bourgeois class struggle. As far as that goes, one could say, it is from the point of view of the bourgeoisie that the state is represented as a “sphere” distinct from the rest, distinct from civil society (whether it is in the sense of Hegel or in the sense of Gramsci), outside civil society, while the state has always profoundly penetrated civil society, not only with money and the law, not only with its repressive apparatuses, but also with its ideological apparatuses (after a long reflection, I believe I can, despite the subtlety of Gramsci's analysis, maintain the concept of ideological state apparatuses, to make it clearly felt that hegemony is exercised through forms which, even if their “origin” is spontaneous, are integrated and transformed in ideological forms which have an organic relation to the state; the state can “find” these forms, and this is always what happens in history: it never ceases to integrate-unify them in forms which assure hegemony).

Everything happens as if, by the fact that the state (and this is correct) is the ultimate stake of the class struggle, politics has been reduced to the sphere of its stake... Against this illusion, directly induced by bourgeois ideology and a conception reducing politics to its stake, Gramsci very clearly understood that “everything is political,” therefore there is no “sphere of politics,” therefore if the distinction between political society (or state) and civil society defines the forms imposed by ideology and the bourgeois practice of politics, the workers' movement must be done with this illusion, and make for itself another idea of politics and the state.

Concerning the state, it is a matter before all else of not reducing the functions of the state to the visible sphere of its apparatuses alone: the state has always been “expanded” and it is very necessary to understand this point against those who make of this “expansion” a recent and fundamental event. It is the forms of this expansion that have changed, but not the principle of expansion. Simply we have been blind up to a recent period about the fact of the expansion of the state, which is constitutive of the state of absolute monarchy (if not even further back) and of the capitalist state.

Concerning politics, it is a matter above all else of not reducing it to the forms officially sanctioned as political by bourgeois ideology: the state, popular representation, the political struggle over the possession of state power, political parties, etc. If we enter into this logic and remain in it, we risk falling not only into “parliamentary cretinism” but above all the juridical illusion of politics: since politics is defined by political right, and this right consecrates (and consecrates only) the forms of politics defined by bourgeois ideology, including in the activity of parties.

It is not a matter here either of “expanding” the existing politics, but of knowing how to listen to politics where it happens. An important tendency is currently taking shape, to take politics out of its bourgeois juridical status. The old party/union distinction is

put to a harsh test, totally unforeseen political initiatives emerge outside the parties, and even outside the workers' movement (ecology, women's struggles, youth struggles, etc.), in a great confusion certainly, but which can be productive. The "generalized politicization" of which Ingrao speaks is a symptom which appears to me to be necessary to interpret as a savage and profound putting into question of the classical bourgeois forms of politics. From this point of view Italy is at the forefront of the initiatives. I readily interpret on this point the great difficulties of the PCI at integrating or even having contact with certain new movements as the sign that the classical conception of politics and the role of the parties has been challenged. And naturally this has also put into question the organizational form of the communist party, constructed exactly on the model of the bourgeois political apparatus (with its parliament which discusses, "the base," and its leadership which, whatever happens, has the means to stay in place, and to assure, in the name of the party ideology, the domination of its "line"). It is evident that this profound contamination of the conception of politics by bourgeois ideology is the point on which the future of the workers' movement will be played out.

3. This is why I feel ill at ease before formulas of this kind: "the theoretical form of the 'political sphere' in the transition period. Let's admit that it must go through the party which makes itself the state..." Actually, it seems to me impossible to accept this idea (defended, if I'm not mistaken, by Gramsci in his theory of the Modern Prince, which takes up in fact a major theme, explained well by Machiavelli, of the bourgeois ideology of politics). If the party makes itself the state, we have the USSR. I have been writing for a long time, to Italian friends, that never, absolutely never, on principle, must the party consider itself "a party of government" – even if it can, in certain circumstances, participate in government. On principle, according to its political and historical purpose, the party must be *outside the state*, both under the bourgeois state, and even more so under the proletarian state. The party must be the instrument of the destruction of the bourgeois state, before becoming, bit by bit, one of the instruments of the withering away of the state. The political exteriority of the party with regard to the state is a fundamental principle that we can draw from the scarce texts of Marx and Lenin on this question. Without this autonomy of the party (and not of politics) in relation to the state, we will never get out of the bourgeois state, however "reformed" we want it to be.

It is this autonomy of the party in relation to the state which allows the possibility (or even the necessity) of what is formally called "pluralism." There is every advantage to the existence of *parties* in the transition: this can be one of the forms of the hegemonization of the working class and its allies – but on one condition, that the party be unlike the other, that is, solely a piece of the political ideological state apparatus (the parliamentary regime), but fundamentally *outside the state* by its activity among the masses, impelling in the masses the action which belongs to the destruction of the apparatuses of the bourgeois state, and the withering away of the new revolutionary state.

The number one trap is the state: be it under the political forms of class collaboration in existing "legality," or under the mythical form of the "becoming-state of the party." I say mythical from a theoretical point of view, since it is unfortunately too real in the "socialist" countries.

I know that it is not easy to take such a political position: but without it the autonomy of the party is irremediably compromised, and there is no longer any chance of escaping from the risk either of class collaboration, or of the party-state and its consequences.

But if we manage to take such a position, questions like those that have been raised by Italian socialists seem to me to be put back in their proper place. Of course, it is necessary that the transitional state observe and enforce the juridical "rules of the game" which protect people and "dissidents" or oppositions. But if the party is autonomous, etc., it will respect the "rules of the game" in what its interlocutors consider, according to classical bourgeois ideology, the "sphere of politics" – while doing politics in the realm that decides everything: in the movement of the masses. The destruction of the bourgeois state is not the suppression of all rules of the game, but the profound transformation of its apparatuses, some of them suppressed, others created, all revolutionized. It is not in limiting the "rules of the game" or in suppressing them (as in the USSR) that one can wish for the action of the popular masses to be expressed: the rules of the game such as they are are conceived by classical ideologies that are part of an entirely different game, much more important than that of right, as Bobbio himself knows very well. If the party maintains its class autonomy and initiative of action, it has everything to gain and nothing to lose in observing and proposing rules of the game. But if it loses its class autonomy and initiative of action, then the "rules of the game" will serve completely different interests than those of the popular masses.

4. It is hard for me to enter into the very interesting discussion that is taking place in Italy (Amata-Ingrao-de Giovanni) even if only for reasons of political semantics. I would say that I find myself very close to Ingrao, when he underlines the necessity of seriously taking into account all the new movements that have developed outside the parties, when he notes the change in attitude of the parties (refusing totalizing visions), when he declares that the question of the political party is posed in new terms. I follow him less (but doubtless I have not understood him) when he seems to speak of the state and the political sphere (current and in general) as constituting in some way *the measure of all politics*, when he speaks of the "socialization of politics" as if it has not rather been a matter (he says it elsewhere) of a "politicization of the social" since speaking of a "socialization of politics" supposes the *preexistence* of a politics which would socialize itself, and this politics which "socializes" itself can only be politics in its dominant form. What is interesting to me, in the very examples that Ingrao cites, is that things happen *in reverse*: not politics towards the masses, but the masses towards politics, and, what is crucial, *towards a new practice of politics*. This may be why I am reticent when I see Ingrao declare that the conflictuality and the diversity of movements "gives a greater importance to the moment of *general mediation*." I regret that he speaks in such abstract terms, and can thus give the impression of focusing on the

state as such, without bringing to the foreground its transformation. This may be (?) a quirk that comes from Gramsci, who had the tendency to conflate the state apparatus with its functions.

With the same reservations regarding the similar formulations of de Giovanni (socializing politics; diffusivity of politics into the "particular"; molecular diffusion of politics, etc.) and also his thesis of the "diffusion of the state" which can be ambiguous, recalling the "expansion of the state," and which can conflate the state and politics (see above), I am very close to him when he evokes "the crisis of the autonomy of politics" and above all when he defines *this* politics: "What is the theoretical form and organizational practice of the old state": since he calls politics by its name, the forms of hegemony which are in place. And I agree with him when he notes very correctly that "the exaltation of political mediation springs from the risks of 'weakness' contained in the simple 'diffusion.'" This is the decisive point: *politics does not "diffuse" itself* (implied: from above, starting with the forms of the state and even of the parties), without running the risk of technicism or of a "participation" which runs up against the wall of state power (since it can even organize it!). "It does not seem sufficient to respond in 'general' to historically existing power (*here again the general is called by its name*) by the self-management of autonomies. The decisive point is still hegemony, which is given by the whole form in which the construction of the state must be expressed." Hegemony, construction of the state: here are the words which say to us, in their own way, that it is necessary to "decode" like any other the "encrypted" article of de Giovanni, of things known for a long time.

– Translated by Asad Haider

taken from Viewpoint Magazine

Foto: Stefan Paulus

[< PREVIOUS](#) [NEXT >](#)

META

[CONTACT](#)

[FORCE-INC/MILLE PLATEAUX](#)

[IMPRESSUM](#)

[DATENSCHUTZERKLÄRUNG](#)

TAXONOMY

[CATEGORIES](#)

[TAGS](#)

[AUTHORS](#)

[ALL INPUT](#)

SOCIAL

[FACEBOOK](#)

[INSTAGRAM](#)

[TWITTER](#)